Cahiers du MONDE RUSSE

Cahiers du monde russe
Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États indépendants

57/4 | 2016
Varia

Alexeï Evstratov, Les Spectacles francophones à la cour de Russie (1743-1796), L'invention d'une société

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OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10009
DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.10009
ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher
Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 October 2016
Number of pages: 915-918
ISBN: 978-2-7132-2542-0
ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference
Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, « Alexeï Evstratov, Les Spectacles francophones à la cour de Russie (1743-1796), L'invention d'une société », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 57/4 | 2016, Online since 01 October 2016, Connection on 24 September 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10009 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.10009

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Alexeï EVSTRATOV

Les Spectacles francophones à la cour de Russie (1743-1796)
L'invention d'une société
Oxford : Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Voltaire Foundation), 2016, 390 p.

Although rich in cultural creativity and intellectual achievement, the Russian Enlightenment does not always receive the attention it deserves from historians of Europe. Early in Russia's eighteenth century, the religious traditions and political arrangements of Muscovy intersected with the reforms and resource mobilization of Tsar Peter I to propel an accelerated process of cultural innovation that by the 1750s produced a self-consciously Europeanized court and nobility. Historians have documented the westernization or Europeanization of Russia's educated service classes and related patterns of artistic, scientific, philosophical, and institutional change; however, the subject matter is vast, and the concrete results of the "cultural revolution" remain difficult to assess.[1] For this reason, no matter how voluminous the scholarship at hand, new studies that are thoughtfully conceived and deeply researched cannot fail but to illuminate and delight.

This is the case with Alexeï Evstratov's study of Francophone theater at the court of Catherine II and among the nobility of St. Petersburg. Established in 1743, during the reign of Empress Elizabeth and years before the founding of the Russian Theater in 1756, the French Theater highlights critical trajectories of eighteenth-century history. Assisted by diplomatic agents abroad, the Russian monarchy imported impresarios and actors to stage plays in French. The French troupe joined a corps of Italian performers maintained at court since the 1730s and was in subsequent decades augmented by Russian and German troupes. Also imported were the plays to be performed, the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French authors, including classical playwrights such as Corneille and Molière, Enlightenment luminaries such as Voltaire, and popular writers such as Destouches and Favart.

Evstratov has done a superb job of reconstructing the repertoire and calendar of French theater in the period 1743-1796. Focused on the reign of Catherine II, Evstratov's statistics show that the choice of repertoire corresponded above all to the taste of the empress, which in turn followed patterns found across Europe. Tragedy receded, and comedy became dominant, both the classical satires of a Molière and the more fashionable tearful comedies of a Favart. In addition to the data on repertoire and performances, Evstratov discusses the actions and thoughts of the individuals responsible for bringing French theater to St. Petersburg. Because Empress Catherine played a direct role in organizing, financing, and selecting content for the theater, it became integral to the everyday life of the court and elite nobility. The broader impact of the court's Francophone culture is likewise evident from the amateur theatricals staged in private settings outside the imperial palaces and from the longevity of French theater, which continued to be performed in Russia until 1918.

A second focus of Evstratov's study is the architecture of theater halls, the behavior of audiences, and the social significance of access to and seating arrangements within performance spaces. Most of this research centers on the opera house in the Winter Palace, but attention also is given to Catherine's Hermitage Theater, a "private" stage within the palace, and to venues beyond the court, such as public theaters for paying audiences, educational institutions (for example, the Cadet Corps and the Smol´nyi Institute for Noble Girls), and personal residences. The analysis of access, seating, and venues highlights the monarch's ability to orchestrate political representation and social intercourse at court and in elite society. To be favored, honored, respected, or simply tolerated by the empress—all of these conditions could be witnessed at theater performances within the palace or wherever members of the imperial family might be present. In theater halls, diplomats, courtiers, aristocratic magnates, high-ranking officials and military officers, and a smattering of merchants and lesser notables participated in and/or witnessed the displays of political power and social privilege that defined court society.

The empirical data collected in this book are both original and informative. Equally valuable, and scattered throughout the discussion of basic facts, are colorful vignettes about great families, diplomats, and voyagers, including, for example, discussion of a lost play that Diderot reportedly wrote for the French theater when he visited St. Petersburg in 1773-1774. Although a more structured elucidation of big interpretive questions would have enhanced the historiographical impact of Evstratov's book and made for a smoother presentation, significant points can be gleaned from the narrative.

One key issue is the European context for the development of Francophone theater in Russia. While perhaps self-evident, the European nature of French theater at court, and the evidence it provides of France's cultural empire, did not prevent the Russian experience from becoming distinctive. This was not due to the content of the repertoire or even the reception of specific plays, the latter being difficult to document beyond superficial comments about the quality and emotional impact of performances. It was rather the result of Catherine II's personal and personalized authority, moral and political; the image of the monarchy and of Russia that she sought to project, at home and abroad; the geostrategic position and military power of Russia in Europe by the time of her reign; and the civic education, Europeanized etiquette, and enlightened *moeurs* that she sought to instill in her subjects through the medium of theater. In these endeavors she followed the lead of Peter I, though with more refinement and use of persuasion than bludgeoning coercion. Based on Evstratov's extensive reading of letters, memoirs, and the periodical press, familiar images emerge: eager participation by Russian intellectuals in the European republic of letters; heartfelt communications between the empress and leading philosophes (the likes of Grimm, Voltaire, and Diderot); a court elite, and even larger educated service classes, that moved comfortably in the diplomatic, cultural, and public spaces of European society; and a Russian monarchy and nobility that well into the nineteenth century remained remarkably united in their willingness to

learn from the outside world through the importation of cultural, technological, and institutional models. Although Evstratov's discussion also includes subject-specific nuances, the general thrust of the analysis connects French theater to recognized social, political, and cultural themes.

Another big topic concerns Russian monarchy and its relationship to "society," however defined. Here Evstratov's conclusions are potentially more original, but also more problematic. The author subtitles the book "the invention of a society," yet what he means by society is not always clear. Although Evstratov gives a nod to the public sphere of Jürgen Habermas (and the sizeable corpus of Habermasian social and cultural history), he does not have in mind a translocal social identity beyond familism and parochialism, or a politically organized civil society, or even the arena of semi-free expression and intellectual exchange known as "the republic of letters." Nor does the socioeconomic structuralism of the *Annales* or the cultural structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss seem relevant to the discussion. Instead, Evstratov deploys the concept of an emotional community, which he connects to mechanisms of social control and discipline. There is here the hint of an innovative approach to social history (the history of emotions), though one foreshadowed in the late twentieth century by studies of collective *mentalité*, so-called psychohistory, and the history of private life. Emotional identification and manipulation do indeed represent powerful mechanisms of social control, and these mechanisms appear in almost every historical context: liberal and authoritarian political systems, communities and work environments of all forms, and families. The question of how people remain reconciled to the conditions of collective or community life is, moreover, especially suggestive in the Russian case, because of the country's long history of authoritarian government, intermittent revolution, and in the eighteenth century, broad-based acceptance of monarchical authority and social hierarchy.

The concrete manifestation of Evstratov's emotional community appears to be the society of the court, headed by the monarch, where all was not repression and fear. To the contrary, the private life, personalized authority relations, and sentimental attachments visible on the stage and in theater venues also served as models of behavior in enlightened elite society. The author does not fully explain the parameters of the emotional community or how it functioned at court, and he ignores the role of religion in the moral education and sentiments of Catherine's subjects. But Evstratov nonetheless hits upon an important dimension of eighteenth-century social life, one that helps to explain the vitality of criticism, dissent, resistance, and outright rebellion alongside general acceptance of aggressive state building, imperial expansion, and serfdom. Why did overt political opposition—in the sense of a program aimed at changing political institutions and arrangements (not just personnel, as in the palace coups of the eighteenth century)—appear only in the 1820s? That Catherine's court theater dominated the theater of society and of educational institutions underscores the question.

It is interesting that Evstratov's concept of society corresponds to one of the definitions of *obshchestvo* offered in the dictionary of the Russian Academy published in 1789-1794: an assembly (*soslovie* or *sobranie*) of people identified

by a shared activity.[2] His definition also fits literary and journalistic depictions of *obshchestvo* as *le grand monde* or good society. The court society of Catherinian Russia, as represented by French theater, therefore suggests a potentially more accurate, or at least a fresher, reading of Russian social development than that established by the "new" social and cultural histories of the 1960s-2000s. Islands of community, including emotional and theater communities (remember also the intellectual circles of the early nineteenth century), amid a sea of moving associations: this image may offer an alternative perspective on social relationships in Russia. Communities, particularly peasant communes and labor unions, always have been present in social history. But is it time for these micro-communities, conceived within a larger framework, to take center stage? There is something here to discuss, and Evstratov should be congratulated for contributing a solid piece of work to an ever-changing conversation.

1 – James Cracraft has written several books on the Petrine cultural revolution in architecture, imagery, and language. For an overview, see James Cracraft, *The Revolution of Peter the Great* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

2 – *Slovar´ Akademii rossiiskoi* [Dictionary of the Russian Academy], 6 vols. (SPb., 1789-1794).

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Tim BUCHEN, Malte ROLF, éd.
Eliten im Vielvölkerreich
Imperiale Biographien in Russland und Österreich-Ungarn (1850-1918)
Berlin : De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015, 411 p.

L'histoire sociale et les soi-disant tournants culturel et visuel ont éloigné les ouailles de Clio du genre biographique. Même les collègues qui tentent d'explorer l'individu comme sujet historique s'abstiennent de chroniquer la vie de leurs protagonistes. La confrérie a longtemps eu tendance à mépriser l'approche biographique. Celle-ci lui semblait relever du roman historique et psychologique ou, au meilleur des cas, du journalisme plus ou moins bien informé. L'histoire qu'on écrivait avec une « h » majuscule, et qui consistait en des problématiques spécifiques et révélatrices de leur temps, ne se confondait pas avec celle de la personne. La tendance commence à changer, mais les réticences restent fortes.

Il faut donc une bonne dose de témérité pour annoncer dans le sous-titre d'un ouvrage qu'il traite de biographies. Circonstance atténuante peut-être, ces biographies sont qualifiées d'« impériales ». Car, on assiste aussi à un tournant impérial, à l'étude d'empires, une notion qu'on ne définit pas tout à fait clairement. Si l'on se fonde, comme c'est souvent le cas, sur des critères comme la multi-ethnicité,